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ABSTRACT

In this paper the Spanish International Business Program Abroad at Concordia College (Minnesota) is examined. Students in the program live, work, and study in Mexico City (Mexico) for one 4-month semester after completing prerequisite courses in management, accounting, economics, marketing, finance, statistics, Spanish grammar, composition, conversation, Latin American history, and Business Spanish. Pre-travel and re-entry courses are included in the program, and its curricular design is fairly open-ended in order to allow for creative and active experiential learning. The quality of the international experience depends on the degree to which participants can critically reflect on individual action in a cultural context other than their own. The procedures used to document student perceptions (interview, correspondence, journals, etc.) are reviewed and some journal entries are reported. It is concluded that in learner-centered curricula it is important to incorporate student assessments of their own experiences. Contains 9 references. (LB)

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THREE CASE HISTORIES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EVALUATION OF PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE IN THE SPANISH INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS PROGRAM ABROAD

Prepared by Viann Pederson de Castaneda for the Eleventh Annual Conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions, March 26-28, 1992.

Concordia College

THEORETICAL RATIONALE

The official planning document of the college states that "International education consists of several components: study abroad, internationalizing the campus curriculum, and the presence of international students on campus. Through a combination of the experiences that these components offer, students can learn to recognize and confront problems in cultural contexts other than their own" (Blueprint IV, 1991). International education "opens an avenue for personal and institutional commitment and action in response to significant world issues" (Blueprint IV, 1991). As one of more than forty international programs abroad at the college, the International Business Program in Spanish is intended to provide an international curriculum component.

Students live, work, and study in Mexico City for one four-month semester after completing the prerequisite courses in management, accounting, economics, marketing, finance, statistics, Spanish grammar, composition, conversation, Latin American history and Business Spanish. Acceptance into the program is based on the completion of these required courses, a formal written application in

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essay format, and individual interviews conducted by the business and language faculty. During the semester immediately preceding travel, all students in international programs are required to enroll in a preparation for travel course. All returning students take a re-entry course designed to provide an environment in which each individual foreign experience is discussed, compared, and contrasted. Students are encouraged to reflect and to search for the commonalities and for the differences in each other's experiences.

The curricular design for International Business is not based on selected readings, lectures, planned visits to significant sites or prescribed exposure to cultural information. There are no practiced explanations about specific assumptions meant to rationalize diversities, or outcomes as definitions of predetermined assumptions provided by an authority. Explanations and pre-determined outcomes leave little opportunity for creative construction of individual meaning in any experience. As teachers and as learners it becomes important to consider that "....we are very easily trained to be content with a minimum of meaning" (Dewey, 1916). Outcomes and assumptions, in order to achieve significance or to construct meaningful knowledge need to be formed "....under conditions of vital experience which require us to use judgement: to hunt for the connections (Dewey, 1916). Reflection, designed as an attempt to analyze and understand experience, surpasses

assumption and contentment with minimal meaning to question individual perspectives and cultural biases to raise new questions which require further experience. The construction of meaningful knowledge within an international context challenges the teacher and the learner to recognize knowledge as theoretical and to allow experience to provide for the conscious and continual modification of that knowledge through reflection and action, a pedagological process which involves praxis or "action-reflection" (Freire, 1988).

Active experiential learning in the International Business Program in Spanish requires students to relinquish the traditional classroom setting in exchange for the diversity of life, employment, and education in a foreign culture. The context of this program is global as are its philosophical objectives. Empathy and understanding of cultural diversity, however, is ideographic in each "concrete real-life situation" (House, 1978). Human choice is the process of reflective knowing exercised in a dialectical search for meaning unique to each participant. In the absence of specific *a priori* outcomes, ethnography (a qualitative methodology comprised of case studies, interviews, and observations) appropriately investigates the focus of experience within this global perspective.

METHODOLOGY

The quality of the international experience depends on the degree to which participants are able to critically reflect on individual action in a cultural context other than their own. "The transactional model of evaluation focuses on events occurring in and around the actual program in context" (House, 1978). In this naturalistic approach, each case is unique, and emphasizes perception and knowing as a transactional process. "Perceiving is always done by each person from his own unique position, experiences, and needs....each person creates his own psychological environment by attributing aspects of his experience to the environment....consequently, the world as it is experienced is the product of perception, not the cause of it" (House, 1978).

In order to capture these perceptions, I interview students using an open conversation format the week before they are to leave for Mexico City using one common initial question: "What do you expect?" The conversation continues, sometimes with questions, apprehensions, or last minute logistical details. At mid-semester, I meet with students in Mexico and give them ten index cards with the following words printed on them: *important to me, sad, torn between, strong conviction, anxious, success, angry, frustrated, lost something,* and *moved or touched.* Each student is asked to write the first thing that comes to mind on each card and then to put them in order of importance. These cards then form the basis of the interview. When the students return

after four months, the transcriptions of the mid-semester interviews and journal entries form the basis of the discussion for a group interview. The group varies in size from two to five students.

Document analysis in addition to journal entries includes required weekly correspondence, performance evaluations from the employer/supervisors, and a written evaluation from the families students live with. Mid-semester interviews are also conducted with families, employer/supervisors, and professors at the university where the students are enrolled in two semester courses. On-site observation forms an additional component of this research paradigm.

BILL: The hockey player from central Minnesota

Bill worked in the marketing division of a multinational corporation which has operations in over 100 countries. The chronicle of his experience is in his words, his supervisor's words, and in the words of other students in the program.

> "I met my boss, he's a nice guy, but he told me my job and it's way too much....today got me really nervous thinking that he expects that much from me."
>
> Journal entry: Day 3, Bill

> "Then on the way out to the pyramids, we passed all slums and the traffic was horrible and so was the smog and I said 'What the hell am I doing here?' I decided then I was coming home...."

Journal entry: Day 9, Bill

"Bill really wants to come home. We can't tell him what to do because he's paying for school. His father suggested I call you..."

Phone call: Bill's mother, Day 10

"We're all depressed. It doesn't help that Bill wants to go home."

Letter: Student on Program Dated Day 8

"Then he gave me a tape of the meeting with the CEO and asked me to translate to Spanish....It took me about 5 hours....Work was fun."

Journal entry: Day 34, Bill

"When I showed him his translation in *Excelsior* the next day, it was the turning point in his experience with us. It's sometimes difficult to involve students if they arrive in the middle of a project."

Interview: Supervisor

"Then at 4:00 we had a meeting....with some advertising company trying to sell us their idea.... we were waiting for Carlos to be in it too. We sat and waited for him for 15 minutes and the people weren't even getting mad....I could see him just walking around out in the office. I'm sure he was doing something, but it bugged me how he was just taking his time to come in."

Journal entry: Day 25, Bill

"He (Bill) has managed to adapt to the conditions that he has confronted and knows more about the culture."

Mid-term evaluation, Supervisor

"Sad day. Mary left. We just talked, hugged and said good bye and she went up the steps at 1:10 p.m. We both cried. Took the metro home."

Journal entry: Day 42, Bill

"I had a hard time concentrating today....This is really a lot harder than I ever thought it would be. We are going without so many of the freedoms that I

just took for granted at home.

Journal entry: Day 53, Bill

"She and Francisco went out for a beer....She is so stupid....He treats her like....all men treat women here and then buys her roses or a stuffed animal and she falls for it!"

Journal entry: Day 47, Bill

"Thanksgiving, everyone is in the U.S. now eating turkey and stuffing and I'm at work....Went to John's for Thanksgiving. It was great! He lives in the Zona, in a very nice penthouse with three floors ....This was Andres and Gina's first meal like that with turkey and stuffing and stuff. They said they liked it, but they like Mexican food better. That's just weird to think that people don't just love our American food. I mean I think it's the greatest food in the world and these guys thought it was OK. Oh well.

Journal entry: Day 78, Bill

"This morning I finally got the guts to confront Clara about why she mixes the *Zucaritas* and the Corn Flakes together..."

Journal entry: Day 83, Bill

"I had them over for lasagna and those guys can eat! We couldn't believe it!"

Phone call: Adjunct faculty
Day 45

"I haven't learned anything!...now I'm probably gonna flunk marketing...."

Journal entry: Day 54, Bill

"....after looking at my grades, attendance and participation, he decided to give me a 10, yeah, a 10.

Journal entry: Day 103, Bill

"....This whole situation, this co-op, I hate it!"

Journal entry: Day 44, Bill

"He shows potential for a marketing position in Latin America...."

Final evaluation, Supervisor
Day 119

> "I realized last night that I think I'll really miss miss Mexico....I think I have had fun and it's been a <u>great experience</u>. I think that if I had a job here and was living with Mary, I would like it here.
>
> Journal entry: Day 106, Bill

Bill will graduate this spring. During the first few weeks after he returned from Mexico, he said he really didn't like the program all that much. When I talked to him two weeks ago, his words were "I miss those people so much, I've gotta write to them....I have to go back there."

BOB: an honor roll student from a metropolitan area

> "My impressions of Mexico City are as diverse as the people who live here....In my mind I had imagined a city without technology and industry. The reality is that I have discovered a large urban center."
>
> Letter: Day 4, Bob

> "My experiences at the brokerage house have allowed me to develop a new respect for the market and the Mexican economy."
>
> Interview, Day 53, Bob

> "The student showed a growing interest....especially in the area of the inter-relationship of the Mexican stock market to other international markets demonstrating the ability to relate the global impact of the fluctuations of each market....He provided the research necessary concerning Japanese market techniques to enable us to incorporate them into the analysis procedure that we presently use in Mexico."
>
> Final evaluation: Day 114, Supervisor

"The marketing professor has the ability, the knowledge, and the enthusiasm to teach even though he can be a little bit authoritarian at times."

Journal, Day 19, Bob

"There have only been two bad ones, they couldn't keep up....Bill showed so much enthusiasm, Jill and Jenny, excellent projects....and Bob, the one that looked European, always so elegant. He was good."

Interview, Mid-term with
Prof. Gonzalez, Marketing

"I didn't realize the intensity of family relationships nor their openness to outsiders."

Journal, Day 25. Bob

"We also want to comment that he is always happy and that is a great satisfaction for us....he adapted to our family and our daily routine with no problem."

Letter: Day 92,
The Family

"When I arrived I tried to compare Mexico and the United States. I think I hoped to discover the United States in Mexico. I have since realized that I need to look at Mexico as an independent country and culture."

Letter, Day 31, Bob

"I'm surprised at the statistics....This (poverty) is a huge problem and the people of the city of Mexico need to work to overcome this problem and work together for a solution."

Letter: Day 4, Bob

"I think my level of cultural consciousness has matured along with my personal independence since we arrived here."

Journal: Day 93, Bob

"I can't believe it! How are these guys gonna make it if they can't iron their own shirts? And here they have to be ironed!"

Letter: Day 14, Female

Classmate

"I'm losing my faith in the educational system in Mexico. Last week I had an exam and the professor proceeded to test us on information that was never mentioned in class...."

Journal: Day 45, Bob

"I make them work hard. If the quality isn't there I'm very direct. I throw projects in the garbage. At work you'll be fired."

Interview: Mid-term,
Prof. Gonzalez, Marketing

"The opportunities available to us (the United States) abroad will remain unrealized if we lack the individuals specialized in the laws, languages, and cultures of foreign nations."

Letter: One year later,
from Bob in Japan

Bob returned from Mexico, finished his last semester, and has spent the year in Japan, learning the language and the culture. From Japan, he applied to several law schools in January. He returns this spring.

MELISSA: from a farm near a town of 200 inhabitants

"Melissa doesn't say hello to people in the office when she comes in in the morning. I know that when I'm in a hurry, I forget too, but I stop and smile and say 'perdon, buenos dias' and then get on with what I need to do."

Interview: Mid-term
Supervisor

"One thing I love about this culture is how people greet each other with a kiss on the cheek. It's a real warm way of saying that you'd like to be friends with someone and that you appreciate their presence and that's what happens every time I go to class."

Interview: Mid-term, Melissa

"The very first thing that I acted outrightly adverse was the way men look at me and talk to me on the street when they say 'guera' (blonde) and things like that, you know. I never expected it because I have dark hair and dark eyes....I feel like they judge me before they know me."

Interview: Mid-term, Melissa

"I took a day trip with Carlos, the son of this family. It was my first trip out of the city....It was just so wonderful for me. I felt like I was back in Colorado. I felt really refreshed and I saw what I expected to see. I saw the little farmers and the houses with the laundry hanging out and we stopped and had quesadillas and it was just so cultural! Here I was in the capital of the State of Mexico and it seemed so different from Mexico City....In the city, I see so many people that are motivated by money."

Journal: Day 9, Melissa

"The people at the university all welcome us and I've become friends with some really neat people who are my age because at work people aren't my age and I can get along with people at work, we laugh a lot but it's not the same."

Interview: Mid-term Melissa

"One day Carolina gave me a very big complement. She said, 'Tu eres una muy buena chica' and she said it with sincerity and that meant a lot to me. I was really nervous about moving into a family because I didn't want to do any socially unacceptable things."

Interview: Mid-term Melissa

"....Melissa, let's go to a market in the street that I know, I want you to see what it is like. And she says yes, let's go. She's great. It's not the same to speak a language as it is to really know a culture because you learned it in the country."

Interview: Carolina
the mother in the family

"....and I really feel like this is a new way of thinking, a new way of living for me, and a new way of growing."

Journal: Day 20, Melissa

"The first day I was at work I was given a million things to do. There was a new computer program which shouldn't be a big deal and there wasn't anyone to teach me how to do it so I had to kind of learn.... one of the most exciting things was that I would have the chance to write my own story for the magazine and I was very honored."

Interview: Mid-term, Melissa

"Eventually I learned that if you don't come out and say what you're feeling, that's too bad. It's your responsibility to communicate what you need and what you want and so I really learned to interact in a different way with a boss....I've never been one to be real forceful in interacting with someone of authority I've usually said yes, I'll get it done."

Interview: Mid-term, Melissa

"It's really taught me to be an independent thinker, like for example the annual report that I worked on, I was just given last year's annual report and told to write a new one. I didn't know anything about the 22 committees that make up the annual report so I had to completely investigate this. And a times I had to say I can't meet your deadline. She expected me to write these 22 pages of text that didn't exist in my mind and every once in a while she would say 'Melissa, where's the material?' and I would say, 'I'm working on it' and I would have to say this is what I have and this is what I don't have and this is what you need to give me. I can't make up a story about the finance committee or the vigilance committee when I don't know what they do. That was really interesting because she would just laugh at me sometimes and it was nice because with her I could be open enough to say, you know, what you gave me for the finance committee is no good. I cannot write a report on this and she respected my lack of knowledge. She helped me a lot and would stick up for me."

Interview: Mid-term, Melissa

"School doesn't prepare them for the unexpected. If Melissa can't find the information, she doesn't know how to follow up."

Interview: Supervisor

"Where I'm from teachers don't touch students! I literally jumped because I never expected him to

put his hand on my knee....and I gave him a really dirty look."

Journal: Day 32, Melissa

"Remember when I was so stressed out about my Spanish? I have so many other things to think about that I haven't even considered it lately. The other night we both realized that we don't think about it any more. We just speak it."

Phone conversation: Melissa

"I have come to enjoy washing my face at night in cold water. It's so refreshing! ....I wish I could teach people that you don't need as many things as you have and people have forgotten that."

Interview: Mid-term, Melissa

"The lack of privacy in this house really bothers me ....sometimes I felt like there haven't been any compromises by the family, just respecting us, you know I've had a lot of respect for them.

Interview: Mid-term, Melissa

"She asked me if she could bring her boyfriend here and I said of course. It would be different if I were a spinster but I have four children, and the youngest is 18. She got a scholarship to live in Italy for a year and she speaks English too."

Interview: Carolina
the mother of the family

"Privacy....when I was in college the only place that you could be alone in the dorm was in the bathroom and there were three johns for 18 girls."

Interview: Supervisor

"She came to me in her Melissa voice and I hugged her and told her this is all part of the experience."

Interview: Supervisor

The last time I saw Melissa, she was at the 75th Annual Meeting of the American Chamber of Commerce. She was furiously taking notes with the rest of the press listening

to Ambassador John Negroponte as he addressed the members of the Chamber. Her instructions were....

> "Try to get concentrated quotes, that can be difficult sometimes because people tend to stretch out their meaning. Try to get a theme if you can. Sometimes in speeches, they'll talk about this for a while and they'll talk about that for a while and you need to find a theme. A politician will return to the theme of America's great. Also if he mentions any facts or figures, make sure you get those. For your article, just talk about what he really talks about, you don't need to describe him or his gestures....you've read articles like that where they describe the guy's office. You just stick to the content."
>
> Field notes: Mid-term

Melissa is still in Mexico City and when she returns, she will be home for two weeks before she goes to Germany to complete her second business internship.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM DESIGN

In the last ten years or so, needs assessments for curriculum design have become increasingly more sophisticated under the influence of new assumptions. There has been a tendency for teachers and curriculum designers to rely on intuition to assess the needs of students rather than attempt to discover them. Needs assessment has relied on teachers and experts as the final decision-makers in program design. However, as learner-centered curricula becomes more common, involvement of students becomes more central. The research suggests (Breen, 1984; Kennedy, 1986) a "process" approach to syllabus design in which

formative and summative evaluation of teaching materials by students and faculty is essential to the development of curriculum. A casual qualitative needs assessment showed that all students of "survival" English need to know in a grocery store is how to say "May I cash a personal check?" rather than the names and prices of fruits and vegetables (Johns, 1991).

The length of this paper allows for only a brief glimpse at the "process" these students experience as they adapt to a new culture, a "real" job, and a new environment in a foreign language. The informants have told us several things in their own words which apply to curricula not only applicable to the foreign segment of the program but equally as pertinent to the courses they take while enrolled in a traditional undergraduate degree. I would ask you, the reader to reflect, first on their process, and secondly on the curriculum designs used to teach international business programs in this country and abroad. I would ask you not to be content with a minimum of meaning or with prescriptive assumptions, but to search for meaning through action and continued reflection.

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